

# The Relationship of Sexual Victimization to Risk Perception of Japanese Female College Students

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# The Relationship of Sexual Victimization to Risk Perception of Japanese Female College Students

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American investigations of sexual victimization have tended to focus on rape or sexual assault, which have a relatively high incidence in the U.S. (e.g., Koss et al., 1987; Mills and Granoff, 1992; Scarpa, 2001; Scarpa et al., 2002). The Japanese incidence of rape has been at low level for a long time, 2.4 per 100,000 population (Research and Training Institute of Ministry of Justice, 2009), with an estimated lifetime prevalence for young Japanese females of less than 2% (Konishi, 1996).

Instead, other types of sexual victimization are prevalent among young Japanese females, namely being groped, flashed (exposed to), chased or persistently solicited. For example, 54 - 64% of female students reported that they were groped, 20.8% forcibly embraced, and 46.8% flashed in their life time (Konishi, 1996; Omata, 2002). These sexually molesting acts are called “chikan”<sup>1</sup> in Japan and are illegal. Suzuki reported that 49.3% of 18 - 21 year-old females and 32.1% of 22 - 25 year-olds were victims of these offences in the previous three years (Suzuki, 2000). In addition, other types of sexual harassment are also reported to be prevalent among Japanese young females, although it is unclear whether they are criminal in many cases. Omata (1997; 2002) reported that about 17% of female students have been stalked, and that 34 - 38% of female students have been sexually harassed. Although these sexual offenses are legally considered “minor”<sup>2</sup>, their psychological influences should not be underestimated because these victimizations could heighten female’s criminal risk perception as much as sexual assaults and rape.

Criminal risk perception has been defined as a judgment about security or an estimation of the probability of being victimized (cf., Ferraro, 1995; Hale, 1996;

Lane & Meeker, 2003). Investigators have often discussed the significance of rape for female's risk perception of being victimized (Riger et al., 1978; Maxfield, 1984; Warr, 1985; Ferraro, 1995; May & Dunaway, 2000). However, rape may not be a significant factor in risk perception for Japanese females because rape is not prevalent in Japan. As Maxfield (1984, p.8) wrote, “victims of serious crimes more often express fear and worry about crime, but it is necessary to look elsewhere for explanations of why most people are afraid. This is because serious crime is, fortunately, a relatively rare event.”

For Japanese young females, victimization involving legally minor sexual offences and sexual harassment are more familiar than sexual assault or rape, and may contribute more to their risk perception. Research has shown that many females in other countries also suffer from these sexual victimizations (McNeill, 1987; Junger, 1987; Stanko, 1987; Pain, 1995; Alam et al., 2010). These sexual victimizations may also act to escalate females' fear of crimes because more serious violent acts are expected to follow them (Hanmer & Sanders, 1984; Stanko, 1987). Although these discussions have occurred in the context of the fear of crime, the same would be true for risk perception because the affective and cognitive responses to crime are known to closely correlate with each other (Ferraro, 1995; May, 2001; Shimada et al., 2004). If this reasoning is correct, then the influence of minor sexual victimization and harassment on the risk perception of young Japanese females may be much more serious than what the relatively minor legal sanctions imply. Therefore, we decided to investigate the relationship between sexual victimization and harassment in Japanese female students and their risk perception.

## METHOD

### *Respondents*

Data were obtained from 139 females who attended two Japanese universities during 2004- 2005. Their mean age was 19.4 years (range 18 - 29). Participation was completely voluntary and anonymous.

### *Questionnaire*

The questionnaire consisted of the following items.

*Noncriminal Sexual Harassment and Criminal Victimization.* Victimization was asked about using two questions.

The first question was about sexual victimization that was not necessarily considered criminal but was experienced as threatening. Respondents were asked whether they had started to walk faster in the past year because they felt danger. Respondents who answered “yes” were asked to describe all such situations they had experienced. These experiences were to include cases in which the danger was not only objective but also subjective, including those caused by misunderstanding. Because it is difficult to distinguish objective from subjective danger (cf., Pain, 1995), the only cases analyzed were those where the respondents were chased for a long time, persistently talked to, or propositioned. These experiences were considered to represent noncriminal sexual harassment by a male (McNeill, 1987; Junger, 1987; Stanko, 1987; Pain, 1995).

The second question concerned criminal victimization. It asked whether the respondent or her family members had been victimized in the past year.<sup>3</sup> If the answer was “yes”, the respondent was asked to describe all such situations. These legally criminal victimizations were classified into three categories. The first was “victimization involving a minor sexual offence” consisting of being groped or flashed. The second was “victimization involving a serious sexual offence” consisting of sexual assault or rape. Other victimizations were classified as “victimization involving a nonsexual offence” including property crime, vehicle crime, physical crime, and so on.

Noncriminal sexual harassment and victimization involving a minor sexual offence were merged to constitute “victimization involving sexually indecent acts”. The frequency of each type of victimization was determined from the descriptions provided by the female students.

*Risk Perceptions.* Risk perception was classified into subcategories based on previous research (e.g., Dubow, 1979; Ferraro & LaGrange, 1987). The judgment of personal risk was defined as the individual's estimation of the possibility that she personally will be victimized. The judgment of general risk perception was defined as the estimation of the rate of victimization at societal level (Ferraro and LaGrange, 1987).

There were two questions about personal risk perception: “How safe or dangerous do you think it is for you to walk alone at night?” and “How safe or dangerous do you think it is for you to stay home alone at night?” Respondents answered these questions using a 5-point scale (1=safe~5=dangerous). The Pearson correlation coefficient between the responses to these two questions was high ( $r = 0.56, p < 0.01$ ), so they were summed to constitute the “personal risk perception.”

There were two questions about general risk perception: “Do you anticipate that the crime rate in your neighborhood will increase or decrease from now on?” and “Do you anticipate that the crime rate in Japan will increase or decrease from now on?” Respondents answered these questions using a 5-point scale ranging between 1 (*decrease very much*) and 5 (*increase very much*). Because these two measures of general risk perception were highly correlated with each other ( $r = 0.52, p < 0.001$ ), they were summed to constitute the “general risk perception.”

## RESULTS

### *Victimization*

None of the 129 female Japanese students reported that they were the victim of rape or sexual assault in the last year. However, 28.1% revealed that they had been victimized by sexually indecent acts, such as groping, flashing, or persistently being chased, talked to, or solicited (Table 1). The total incidence of non-criminal sexual harassment was 21.6%, while minor criminal sexual victimization was 10.1%, which also included a few reports of family members being victimized. Some of these women reported multiple experiences, while others reported none. The mean incidence of sexually indecent acts in the past year per woman was 0.4, with a maximum of 6. Examples of non-criminal sexual harassment include respondents who described a man or group of men following them for a long time, sometimes by car, or others who reported that they were persistently propositioned. As for the victimization involving minor sexual offences, most of these were “chikan”, where victims were groped in a train or a man flashed his genitals in a train or on the street.

Table 1. Victimization rate and the mean incidence of each victimization.

Type of victimization	Victimization rate	Mean incidence(range)
Sexually indecent acts <sup>a)</sup>	28.1%	0.4 (0-6)
Serious sexual offence	0.0%	0.0 (0)
Nonsexual offence	10.1%	0.1 (0-2)

a) Victimization by sexually indecent acts including being groped, flashed, persistently chased, talked to, or propositioned.

Table 1 also shows that 10.1% of the respondents were victimized by nonsexual offences, most commonly vehicle theft (bicycle theft). There was some overlap for types of victimization, but overall more than one-third of the female students (36.0%) reported that they were victimized by a sexually indecent act or sexual or nonsexual offense in the past year.

### ***Risk Perceptions***

The Japanese female students' mean score for personal risk was 6.7, which corresponds to the estimation of "rather dangerous." The female students rated their general risk perception as higher, with a mean score of 7.9, indicating that they regarded the security level of their neighborhood and Japanese society as getting slightly lowered.

### ***The Correlation Coefficients between Victimization and Risk Perception***

Table 2 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients between risk perception and victimization experience. The scores for total victimization experiences correlated significantly with the ratings for personal risk perception ( $r=0.286$ ,  $p\leq 0.001$ ). Analyzing the data for each type of victimization, only victimization involving sexually indecent acts significantly correlated with personal risk perception ( $r=0.255$ ,  $p\leq 0.05$ ). None of the victimization indices significantly correlated with general risk perception. Weak correlations for general risk perception were suggested with total victimization and victimization involving sexually indecent acts ( $r=0.165$ ,  $p\leq 0.06$ ;  $r=0.145$ ,  $p\leq 0.10$ , respectively).

Table 2. Pearson correlation coefficients between two risk perceptions and type of victimization.

	Personal risk	General risk
Sexually indecent acts	.255 ***	.145
Nonsexual offence	.113	.068

\*\*\*... $p \leq 0.005$ , \*\*\*\*... $p \leq 0.001$

In order to clarify the contributions of the two kinds of victimization to personal and general risk perception, multiple regression analyses (stepwise method) were carried out. For personal risk perception, victimization involving sexually indecent acts was a significantly contributing factor ( $\beta=0.255$ ,  $R^2 = 0.07$ ;  $F(1, 137)=9.549$ ,  $p=0.025$ ) but nonsexual victimization was not. Neither of these victimizations contributed to general risk perception.

## DISCUSSION

The present study found that noncriminal and legally minor sexual victimization play an important role in Japanese females' risk perception. We began by investigating the actual frequencies of victimization for Japanese young females. The results revealed that many female students had experiences with both noncriminal sexual harassment and minor sexual offences, which we called sexually indecent acts, while more serious sexual victimization such as rape or assault were not reported in our sample. The results also revealed that nonsexual offense victimization was less frequent than victimization involving sexually indecent acts. These data are consistent with previous findings of Japanese young females' victimization during their life time (Konishi, 1996; Omata, 1997; ? 2002). The victimization which is most likely to occur in the experience of Japanese young females is sexually indecent acts of the type called "chikan".

Regarding the relationship between criminal victimization and risk perception, the perception of personal risk reflects the actual conditions of victimization. The estimation of personal risk was correlated with a recent history of victimization

involving sexually indecent acts, including noncriminal sexual harassment. It was not affected by nonsexual victimization or more severe criminal sexual victimization (which was not reported in our sample). These results indicate that the most influential victimization for Japanese young females is the legally minor sexual victimization such as “chikan”.

There are several possible explanations for our findings. One is the escalation theory, which proposes that victims of sexually indecent acts anticipate that they will be the victims of more serious crimes and this expectation in turn, heighten risk perception (Hanmer & Sanders, 1984; Stanko, 1987). This may reflect the old social belief that men who grope or flash may progress to rape. A second explanation is that legally minor victimizations themselves can cause serious psychological damage which is reflected in higher risk perceptions (Omata, 2002; 2003; Rospenda et al., 2009). For example, Omata (2002) showed that about 20% of victims of groping, stalking, or being flashed suffered from flashbacks of the victimization for more than one month, and 25 - 33% of the victims avoided the places where they were victimized. Thus, even a legally minor victimization could have serious psychological influences which make victims more cautious thereafter.

On the other hand, the influence of serious sexual victimization which many investigators have pointed out (e.g., Riger et al., 1978; Warr, 1985; May & Dunaway, 2000) was not found. One possible explanation is that the period we used for examining victimization may be too short for an effect to emerge, because we examined victimization only in the previous year. However, even if victimization during longer period is examined, it still might be difficult to find a relationship because few Japanese females have been victimized by rape in their life time (Konishi, 1996; Omata, 2002).

None of the victimization indices clearly related to the general risk perception, even though a weak correlation was suggested with victimization involving sexually indecent acts. This is consistent with the findings of Tyler (1980), who also could not confirm a significant relationship between victimization and general risk perception. In contrast, Junger (1987) found a relationship using a female sample and studying sexual harassment. One possible cause of this difference could be the different indices of criminal victimization. The present study and Tyler's examined several



types of victimization, while Junger only examined sexual harassment. Another factor was the correspondence between the type of crime mentioned in the question of victimization and implied in the question of general risk. As Baker et al. (1983) pointed out in their discussion of fear of crime, if the dissociation between the types of crime is large, then the expected relationship would not be obtained. Our respondents might have thought about different types of crime when they read “the crime rate in your neighborhood” or “the crime rate in Japan”, while Junger’s respondents were required to respond about “the risk for women” which easily reminded them of sexual crimes. Therefore, further investigation is necessary about the relationship of direct victimization and general risk perception.

The present findings have some theoretical and practical significance. First, they provide useful data to understand the psychological mechanism of risk perception in nations with low victimization rates but high risk perceptions like Japan (Hamai & Okada, 2001; Research and Training Institute of Ministry of Justice, 2009). Although some factors like the influence of mass media have been discussed, the present study uncovered the possibility that victimization involving legally minor offences or noncriminal but threatening events can influence peoples’ attitudes toward crime. Second, the present findings provide an empirical basis for heightening social concern about legally minor but prevalent sexual victimizations, especially “chikan”. Japanese society is now starting to more vigorously combat these offenses. The present findings support such countermeasures for crime prevention. In addition, many people, especially men, tend to treat these criminal acts lightly even now, and so the investigation of legally minor offences like “chikan” may contribute to changing such trends in Japanese society.

However, further studies are needed to verify the present results using samples other than university students, because some investigators suggest that young adults who do not attend university tend to be more frequently victimized (Lauritsen et al., 1991; Leonard et al., 2002).

#### Footnotes

- 1) The original meaning of “chikan” is a man who performs sexually indecent behaviors, but now the term usually denotes sexual behaviors that occur on a

train or on the street. In most cases the behavior called “chikan” involves groping a female’s body, but sometimes includes pressing the genitals against the victim’s body, or flashing the exposed genitals. Thus, chikan is a legally minor sexual offense done by a stranger in a public space. These criminal acts recently became a serious social problem in Japan, and most train companies now have cars exclusively for females during commuting times.

- 2) It is difficult to measure the seriousness of victimization because the psychological damage depends on many factors (Kelly, 1987). Therefore, the present study used “serious” or “minor” only in the legal sense, similar to the legal terms of “felony” or “misdemeanor” in the American criminal justice system.
- 3) Another way to ask about victimization would include victimizations that occurred more than one year ago because victimization several years ago also might influence risk judgments (Pain, 1995). However, the present study limited the period of victimization to control for the accuracy of the memory of victimization. This is particularly important because most of the reported acts of victimization were fleeting or brief contacts with strangers, which might be less memorable over a period of years than, for example, sexual assaults.

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